

What to Look (Out) For in a Leader (23:1-12)

Turn with me, if you have a bible, to **Matthew 23**. A week ago, my family and I spent the weekend in the Smoky Mountains with the members of City Church. It's something we do every year that we call *Family Vacation*. The idea is that if church at its core is a family, then it only makes sense to go on Family Vacations. But like the *fun* kind—not the kind they make cynical movies about. So every year, we get two of those large, side-by-side cabins in Gatlinburg and just spend the weekend relaxing together and celebrating all that God has been up to in our church. One of my favorite things that we do.

One of the best parts of the weekend, in my opinion, is that on the first night we're there, we play a game called *Never Have I Ever*. Just for clarity, that's not the drinking game—felt like I needed to say that before some of you new folks get the wrong idea about us as a church. The way it works is that we set up a bunch of chairs in a circle, but there's one less *chair* than there are people. And the person *without* a chair says something they've *never* done, like “never have I ever lived in California.” And if you *have* lived in California at some point, you have to get up and find a new chair. It's basically a game of *musical chairs* but way more personally *embarrassing* for everyone playing.

And we do at least *try* to keep it PG. For instance, you're allowed to say something like “never have I ever been *arrested*,” but not what you got arrested *for*—that kind of thing. But sometimes we're unsuccessful. For instance, one person this year said “never have I ever smoked weed,” and, I kid you not, the only person who got up ~~saying they had~~ was *ME*. At which point I reminded everyone there that lying, according to the bible, is a sin. But it's a fun game to play with everybody. One, because you get to watch people almost tackle each other in order to get a chair. But two, because you get to know people really well. I, for instance, did not know how many people in our church had been arrested—and now I know. Very useful information.

But honestly that was just one part of a very, very fun weekend. And I think part of the reason it's fun for me is because Family Vacation is one of many reminders I get throughout the year that while I am technically helping to *lead* this church family, I also just get to be a *part of* it. **When I think about all the things I love about our church, very rarely are those things related to me being one of the people *in charge*. It's usually just related to just *existing within* it.** And I've learned through the years that that experience is somewhat *rare* among church leaders. For a lot of pastors I know, when they think about their church, they don't primarily think of it like *that*; they usually think of it more as an organization that they have the burden of *leading*. **I praise God**

that, at least a vast majority of the time, that is not my sentiment towards City Church.

But I will tell you: that dynamic—where I just get to be a *part of* our church—is something that we *have* worked very hard to cultivate here at City Church. From the beginning, me and the other leaders said that we didn't ever want it to ever feel like we were on a *pedestal* as leaders of this church. We didn't want to be thought of as “the pastors,” but rather as just normal people belonging to this community, who happen to have the responsibility of leading it. And that culture can be **a very difficult thing to cultivate**. The natural *inclination*, I think, is to give into some form of *hierarchy*: for pastors to see themselves as elevated *above* other people in the Church, and other people in the Church to see their leaders as somehow spiritually superior to them. That's the *tendency*.

And today's *passage*, in many ways, is about that very tendency. In chapter 23, Jesus is going to begin a very pointed critique of certain religious leaders in his day. And *much* of the critique is connected to them being put on a *pedestal* of sorts, both because of their own actions, and that of others. People saw them—and they saw *themselves*—as existing on a somewhat different *plane* than everyone else.

The two groups Jesus is going to speak about are the *teachers of the law*, and the *Pharisees*. If you're newer to the bible, these two groups were major components of the religious *leadership* in Jesus' day. The *teachers of the law* were pretty much exactly what it sounded like: people that were experts in teaching and interpreting the Old Testament law. The *Pharisees* were a *sect* of Judaism particularly concerned with the *ethical* and *purity* laws in the Old Testament: the regulations around what foods you ate, what you wore, and how you conducted yourself in public. **But basically, these two groups were usually seen as authorities on what it meant to know and worship God.**

But beginning in our passage today, we are going to find out **Jesus has quite a few problems with the way these leaders are living, teaching, and leading**. Namely, that they were *operating* precisely the *opposite* of the way he *wanted* them to operate. And we're going to let what he says to *them* give *us* lenses for what we should look for—and look *out* for—in our *own* spiritual leaders today.

So let's take a look, starting in chapter 23, v. 1:

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.

“Moses’ seat” was a literal *seat* occupying a prominent place in the synagogue. So I don’t know if you grew up in a church tradition like mine, but we had three or four *fancy* chairs on the stage where some of the church leaders would *sit* during the service. Anybody else have that in their church? Okay, so I’m picturing *that*, but way fancier. I don’t know if it was like *jeweled* or *bedazzled* or what, but however it looked, it would’ve been obvious that whoever *sat* in that chair was a big deal. It was called “Moses’ seat” because it was *believed* that whoever *sat* there was sitting in the long, rich tradition of *Moses*—the person in Israel’s history that first *received* the law directly from God. This seat was a big deal. Verse 3:

3 So, Jesus continues, *you must be **careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not **practice** what they **preach**.***

So **here is Jesus’ first critique** of these religious leaders. Evidently, they were at least *saying* good things. They were teaching largely *correct* ideas about the Scriptures and about obedience to God. **So the issue wasn’t with the *content* of what they said; it was they themselves didn’t *do* what they said.** The issue was that they were not *implementing* these correct things they *taught*, into their *own* lives. **Their *lives* weren’t consistent with their *teaching*. Their *character* wasn’t consistent with their *position*.** And Jesus says that we need to learn to distinguish between those two things, especially in how we view our leaders.

Now, it’s hard for me to think of an idea we more need to *understand* in *our* day and age, when it comes to how we view spiritual leaders. I think a lot of us **as followers of Jesus have a difficult time distinguishing between a *gifted* leader, and a *spiritually mature* leader.** We assume, at times, that if a person is *gifted*—whether that’s in regards to leadership ability or charisma or bible knowledge or some combination of those things—if they’re *gifted*, that *must* mean they are *spiritually mature* enough to *lead*. **We often confuse *giftedness* for *character*.**

Which explains why we are so *shocked* when a *gifted* leader has some sort of moral failure. We’re often *shocked* because we assumed that a person with that much *ability* *must* have had the *character* to back it up—but turns out they didn’t. Now the reality is that *anybody*—even the most *mature* followers of Jesus—can fall prey to sin. Sin is deceitful like that. But sometimes, the reason we’re shocked is because without thinking about it, we have confused their *giftedness* with their *character*. And those are not the same thing. **A person can be extraordinarily *gifted*, and be very *immature*.** For example, *Kanye*. So incredibly talented, one of the great artists of our generation. And at the same time, not a *chance* I’m trusting that man to babysit for me. Or do much of

anything that requires paying attention, or sound thinking. Because giftedness and character are not the same thing. And they shouldn't be confused with one another.

Now, just to be abundantly clear, this very much applies to *me* and any of the other leaders in *this* church. Do not assume that just because I stand up here and say things that make sense or resonate with you or *sound* mature to you, that I am *therefore automatically* spiritually mature. **Do not judge my character by my giftedness. Judge my character by my character.** We've mentioned this many times before, but in the bible, when it lists out qualifications for leaders of the church, it barely even *mentions* giftedness or skill or talent.¹ The only *skill* qualification it gives is that a person must be "able to teach." That's the *only* one; every other qualification is *character*-based. **In the kingdom of God, what qualifies you to be a leader is your character.** That's the standard to which you should hold myself, and any other leader you *trust*. Make sense?

Okay. Let's keep moving through our passage. This next critique Jesus offers is *brief*, but I think, very *important*. Verse 4:

4 They (the Pharisees and teachers of the law) *tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.*

Jesus says that hearing these leaders *teach* and interpret the law is like having *weight* after *weight* after *weight* placed right on your shoulders. *But*, Jesus says, these leaders *aren't* willing to do anything to *help* people *carry* the weight. In other words, **they are far more interested in telling people what to do, than they are in helping people learn how to do it.**

Now, I would argue that this *second* critique is a very natural *consequence* of the *first* one. Because think about it: **if you as a leader are not obeying, you're not going to know much about how to help other people obey.** And what's further, you're not going to actually understand the *difficulty* of obeying, because you don't spend much time *obeying*. All of that is going to impact your *tone* when teaching others. You're gonna just expect people to immediately *do* everything you say, without realizing the *gravity* and *nuance* and *difficulty* of what you're calling them to do. Put simply, **if we haven't done the difficult work following Jesus, we're going to have very little patience and understanding towards other people learning to follow Jesus.**

¹ See 1 Timothy 3:1-10, Titus 1:7-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-7.

So, Jesus says, **look out for leaders that weigh people down with their teaching, all because they don't know the difficulty of obeying first-hand.** Verse 5:

5 “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their *phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long;*

“It’s all a show,” Jesus says. **Even the areas where it looks like they are actively obeying...those things are mostly just done for appearances.** *Phylacteries* were essentially leather strips that you wore on your arms and around your head. *Tassels* were pieces of fabric that hung from the corner of your garment. Both of these things had passages of Scripture and Old Testament commandments written on them as *reminders* to obey. None of these things were *necessarily bad* in and of themselves. Wearing them was based on a passage in the book of Deuteronomy.²

But, Jesus says, the Pharisees and teachers of the law—they did all of that for *show*. The Pharisees intentionally made each item of clothing as *large* and as *obvious* and as *visible* as it *could* be. So that people would see all of it and go, “wow—that leader must *really* take obedience to the law *very* seriously.” **They took something that was meant to be personal and reflective, and made it performative.** They wore it simply so that people would *notice* them wearing it, and think of them highly as a result. Verse 6:

6 ...they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues (remember “Moses’ seat”?); **7 they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.**

So these leaders *also* loved being *honored* by other people, and specifically loved it when people referred to them with *titles* of honor...like the title “rabbi.” Okay, so I need to tell you guys a story. A guy I know, a number of years back, was going to visit a buddy of his from high school, who we’ll just call “Rick.” Rick had become the pastor of a relatively large church. And his church had a *policy*, that Rick *himself* put into place, where everybody was *encouraged* to call him “*Pastor* Rick.” Not just “*Rick*,” not “Rick, who happens to be our *pastor*”—but “*Pastor* Rick”—almost like *Pastor* was his first name. That was the *policy*.

So my friend shows up at Rick’s office—excuse me, *Pastor* Rick’s office—and says to the woman at the front desk “hi, I’m here to see Rick.” To which *she* says, “oh, *Pastor* Rick?” And he says “well, yes—but we were buddies in high school, so he’s just ‘Rick’ to me.” And she goes, “okay I’ll let him know that you’re here. But just so you know, around here,

² See Deuteronomy 6:8 (although the instruction was possibly meant figuratively and not literally).

we call him *Pastor* Rick, out of respect for his office.” She’s evidently *dead* serious about all of this. So my friend just goes, “okay, thank you,” and does his best not to laugh at the situation. Because he’s thinking to himself, “this guy once *mooned* me once in high school—I cannot, with a straight face, call him ‘Pastor Rick.’”

So he finally goes back to Rick’s office, and sits down to catch up with him. But before he does, he has to clear the air. He says, “hey man—this is so weird, but everybody out there is telling me I have to call you *Pastor Rick*. I told them we go way back and that’s weird, but they keep telling me that’s what y’all do around here. Can you just tell them it’s cool and I don’t need to do that?” And, I kid you not, Rick looks at his high school friend, 100% serious, and goes, “well actually, I would prefer that. Here at our church, we have a culture of *honor*, so I ask everyone to call me *Pastor Rick*, to demonstrate that.” And my friend, without skipping a beat, goes “dude—if you are telling me that I have to use a *title* to refer to you, I am going to come up with my *own* title for you. And it’s going to be *Captain Butthole*. That is the only title I am going to use to address you.”

Okay, so full disclosure: I told you that story, in part, because I think it’s hilarious and thought you would enjoy it. But *second*, because I’ve found out that is actually a thing at a *lot* of churches today—pastors that *insist* on being called by their title. And many of them, as an *explanation* for *why* they do that, simply say that they want to have a “culture of honor” in their church. Which, on its own, makes sense. That is, until you realize that is *precisely* the motivation Jesus *calls out* in this passage. He says that the Pharisees and teachers of the law love titles *because*, and I’m *quoting* here, “they love the places of honor.” That’s actually Jesus’ precise *problem* with it. ~~So these churches aren’t just doing the *thing* Jesus says not to do, they’re also doing it for the precise *reason* Jesus says not to do it. So that’s not better.~~

But real practically: this is why, here at City Church, we do not ask any of you to call *me* “Pastor Kent” or Jeff “Pastor Jeff” or Marcus “Pastor Marcus.” / And you don’t need to feel *bad* if you have ever called us that (even though we probably did look at you a little weird when you said it). The reason we don’t ask anyone to call us that is because that would be doing something very *similar* to—if not *identical* to—what Jesus says *not* to do in this passage. You don’t need to use titles to address us. It’s just not necessary. / And Jesus is about to explain, in the passage, *why* it’s not necessary. Verse 8:

8 “But **you** (speaking *now* to followers of Jesus—you...) are **not to be called** ‘**Rabbi**,’ for you have **one Teacher** (which is what ‘rabbi’ means), and you are **all brothers**. **9** And do not call anyone on earth ‘**father**,’ for you have **one Father**, and **he is in heaven**. **10** Nor are you to be called **instructors**, for you have **one Instructor, the Messiah**.”

Okay, so let me first just offer a bit of clarity on what Jesus *isn't* intending to say here. Let's start with the most *obvious* one. First, Jesus *isn't* saying that you can't call your biological dad "father." Or "dad." Or anything else along those lines. He's saying that you don't need to call people that as a title of *spiritual* leadership. Second, Jesus is *not* saying that it's *wrong* for you to simply *state* that me or Jeff or Marcus are leaders of our church. As in, "oh that's Kent. He's a pastor here." That's just a description. Third, he is *definitely* not *dismissing* the idea of leadership *altogether* within the Church, as if to say "the church doesn't need any leaders *at all*." If that's what he was saying, there are a lot of passages later in the New Testament that, all of a sudden, do not make much sense.³

None of that is what Jesus is saying here. He's simply saying that **you should be wary of, and watch out for, leaders within the Church that insist on people addressing them by their title.** And *especially*, leaders who seem to really *love* titles because it makes them feel honored or elevated or revered. **That posture, Jesus says, goes directly against the grain of the culture in the kingdom of God. In God's kingdom, there is only one rabbi. There is only one Father. There is only one instructor.** And both *leaders* and *non-leaders* in the church should operate as if that's the case.

Let's finish out our passage, and then we'll talk a bit about some practical implications on all of this. For now, look with me at v. 11:

11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

So this right here is one of Jesus' all-time favorite sayings. **Almost any time that Jesus talks about the idea of leadership, or the idea of "greatness" in the kingdom, he will throw in something resembling those two verses we just read.** It is basically *the operating principle* for how leadership works in God's kingdom. Jesus says that the *greatest* among you (i.e. what many would consider to be the "leaders") should *operate* as the *servants*. That word *servant* was often used to describe the lowest level of employee working for a *king*. The bottom of the org chart. It was the word for "someone who advances someone *else's* interest, at the expense of their own."⁴

So in Jesus' mind, a leader is someone who voluntarily takes the lowest position there is, and looks for ways to advance someone *else's* interests at the expense of their own. That, to Jesus, is what a leader is called to do. So this is the *origin* of a term that has now become somewhat cliché to a lot of us in the church, but is nonetheless a

³ For example, 1 Timothy 3:1-10, 1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:7-9, 1 Peter 5:1-3.

⁴ See Strong's Greek [here](#).

very biblical concept. It's the concept of "servant leadership." Which doesn't just mean a leader who chooses to act humbly from time to time, but a leader who leads *by* serving. It's someone who sees their role as a leader as existing for the express purpose of *serving* and *helping* others.

Just to be honest with you, I don't know that we fully *grasp* just how countercultural this concept of leadership is. I don't know that we realize just how *opposite* it is from the way that the world—and probably most of *us*—tend to think about leadership. So to try and *help us* understand, I drew us some diagrams. And by "drew some diagrams" I mean the *computer* drew them, because if *I* drew them, they would not be helpful. In the *first* diagram, I've drawn out how I think many people *assume* leadership works in the Church. Here is *that* diagram.



So in this model, a "regular person" in the Church *honors* the leader—titles and all. The *leader*, in turn, *serves* God. That's how people sometimes *think* leadership works. And sometimes, *leaders prefer* that people think about it that way. It certainly works out pretty well for *leaders* when they do. But according to Jesus, that's not how it works in the kingdom. According to him, it works more like this *second* diagram...



In *Jesus'* model of leadership, a regular person doesn't exist to serve the *leader*. If *anything*, it's the other way around. The *leader* exists to serve everyone else. A leader is a person on the same plane, same spot on the org chart as everyone else. But that **leader has actually chosen to place themselves below everyone else (like a servant), in order to empower them, train them, and equip them to become who God made them to be.** That is what leadership should look like in the family of God.

Because remember what Jesus said up in v. 8: "you are not to be called 'rabbi,' for you have *one* rabbi, and *you* are all *brothers*." *Siblings*. On the same level as one another. A healthy leader is someone who *recognizes* that, and sees themselves as existing to *serve* others.

So real practically, at City Church: this means that **if someone does not model the posture of a servant, in our view, they are not ready to lead. Because that's what leadership is.** And if someone already *in* leadership does not regularly embody the *posture* of a servant, that's not just a personality trait or a difference in leadership style; it's potentially a reason for them to be removed from leadership altogether, if it's not repented of quickly and thoroughly. Because **our conviction is that this isn't just an interesting idea Jesus sets forward; it is actually an operating principle for leadership in the kingdom of God.** And we want *our* view of leadership to reflect *Jesus'*. Make sense?

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Okay. So with all of that unpacked, what should you do with all of this? Specifically, those of you who *aren't* or have no *aspirations* to be in positions of formal leadership within the church?

Well think back with me for a second to the opening line of this passage. In v. 1, it tells us that Jesus said all of this “to the crowds and to the disciples...” **Apparently, all of this teaching Jesus just gave is not addressed to the spiritual leaders themselves, but some portion of the general public.** Now obviously, at least *twelve* of those people—the so-called *apostles*—*would* play fairly important leadership roles within the early Church. But nearly *everybody else*—likely, the vast majority of people *listening* that day—were not seriously considering religious leadership, and would never *become* religious leaders. And *yet*, Jesus *still felt they* needed to hear what he had to say about how and how *not* to lead. / Why is that? What does Jesus know, that he thinks *they* need to know, about everything he just said?

Likely, at least a few things. *One*, Jesus knows that in some sense, **all followers of Jesus are in at least a type of spiritual leadership.** In Matthew 28, Jesus is going to say *this* to his followers: “Therefore go and *make disciples* of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...”⁵ In short, **if you are a follower of Jesus, you have been officially commissioned by Jesus to teach and equip and lead and disciple other followers of Jesus.** That's *true*, whether or not you are on staff at a church. That's true whether or not you stand up on a stage. That's true whether you see yourself as incredibly spiritually mature and capable, or don't feel like you are *either* of those things. We are *all* called to do this.

Which *means* that in some sense, these cautions and instructions *towards* those in spiritual leadership *do* apply to you, in some way. *You also* are called to care more about

⁵ Matthew 28:19-20a

how you *live* than what you *say*. You also are called to *help* people obey, and not just *tell* them they *must* obey. You also are to resist the urge to do things simply for the sake of appearances. And you also are called to resist the allure of honor for its own sake. These instructions are directed at *formal* religious leaders, to be sure. But their *application* very much includes all of us. It should be applied by *anyone* who claims to follow Jesus.

The *second* thing I think we can learn is this. And this might sound a bit weird coming from me, but **we need you to hold us, as leaders, to these things**. As in, the things in this passage. **The majority of you in this room are here because in some sense or another, you consider us to be your leaders**. You consider yourself a part of this community and therefore are expecting us to lead *you* and help you and equip you to become more like Jesus. And that is an *incredible* responsibility. It's a *tall* task, to be sure. But it's a *joyous* task. Not many days go by where I don't feel the incredible *privilege* that it is to do that.

So with that said, I would also *humbly* ask you for your help. **If you consider yourself a part of this church, would you expect us to lead in the healthy ways laid out in this passage, and would you expect us not to lead in the unhealthy ways laid out in this passage?** On one hand, *none* of the leaders here will ever embody all of this perfectly. But at the same time, we should be consistently striving *for* it. So *expect* us to not just say the right things, but to *be* the right kinds of people. *Expect* us to not just *tell* you what to *do*, but to demonstrate to you how it's done. *Expect* us to care about our personal holiness more than we care about public *demonstrations* of it. And *expect* us to lead you primarily by *servicing* you. And when we *don't*, tell us so we can own it and repent of it. I want to ask that you would *join* us in creating an environment where *healthy* leadership is *expected* and *appreciated*.

So I've got friends who serve in contexts where they are expected to basically be people's spiritual heroes—I don't want that job. I know pastors who are *celebrated* for their charisma and their ability, and not for their character—I don't want that kind of pressure. So every day that goes by, I become more and more grateful that we have a church that celebrates ordinary, consistent, *faithful* leadership. So my request to you is simple: at City Church, can we keep it that way? Let's never become a church that *celebrates* things the Scriptures caution us against. Let's be a church that values the things that Jesus values.

And lastly, I think this passage at least does one more thing. This one's really, really important. I think it calls us to **marvel and stand amazed at the incredible type of leader Jesus is**. As we say often around here, **Jesus never calls us to do anything**

he isn't willing to do himself. So when Jesus describes in this passage the type of leaders we are called to be and trust, it's important for us to realize that he embodies every bit of that in his own life. Jesus had no disconnect between what he *taught* and how he *lived*. He told people to take on *his* teaching, where the “yoke was easy and the burden was light.”⁶ Jesus cared more about *private* holiness than he did public *displays* of holiness. And Jesus gave up every bit of honor he had, as a servant, for our sake.

The apostle Paul, who no doubt was thinking of teachings like *this* one from Jesus, once wrote *this* in Philippians chapter 2:

*In your **relationships** with one another, have the same **mindset** as Christ **Jesus**: Who, being in very **nature God**, did not consider **equality** with God something to be **used** to his own **advantage**; rather, he made himself **nothing** by taking the very **nature** of a **servant**, being made in **human** likeness. And being found in **appearance** as a **man**, he **humbled himself** by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! And what did Jesus say happens when someone chooses to “humble” themselves? They get **exalted**, right? **Therefore God exalted him to the highest place** and gave him the **name that is above every name**, that at the **name of Jesus every knee should bow**, in **heaven and on earth and under the earth**, and **every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord**, to the glory of God the Father.⁷*

Everything you need to know about leadership is right there in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. *That's* what you should look for in a leader. So this morning, we're going to go to the tables together and celebrate that. We're going to take the bread, and the cup—which are symbols of the moment that Jesus “made himself nothing.” That he took on the very nature of a servant. And that he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross. And because he did all of that, you and I get access to the Father; to this new reality opened up for us through the cross and resurrection. And we get access to God's Spirit, who lives within us to help us learn how to humbly lead and sacrifice like Jesus himself did. If you're a follower of Jesus, you're invited to participate in all of that with us.

Let's pray.

⁶ See Matthew 11:28-30

⁷ Philippians 2:5-11